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AUTHOR Wharton, Clifton R., Jr.
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ABSTRACT

The importance of appropriate compensation and employment security for college faculty is discussed, in light of the declining purchasing power and wages for teachers and the erosion of benefits and pension prospects. From 1970 to 1985, the national average faculty salary, adjusted for inflation, fell 15.1%. Regardless of personal commitments and rewards of academic life, the faculty member's salary is not comparable with even beginning professional salaries in corporate or commercial positions. The increasing use of part-time or adjunct faculty is also a concern. Many faculty rely on these appointments for their primary livelihood, sometimes holding part-time jobs at two or more campuses. Since these positions are rarely equal in salaries or benefits with full-time positions, the part-timers experience a kind of marginality within the college that is economically constraining and professionally demoralizing. Another issue concerns mandatory retirement. Some have linked early retirement to the financial incentives for teachers. It is proposed that many of the problems with modern teaching may be directly related to the problems of compensation, standard of living, career development, and material well-being of teachers. (SW)

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TAKING TEACHERS SERIOUSLY

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by Clifton R. Wharton, Jr.

Clifton R. Wharton, Jr. is chairman and chief executive officer of TIAA-CREF. From 1978-1987, he was chancellor of the SUNY system and from 1970-78 was president of Michigan State University. This article is based on his closing plenary address at the 1987 National Conference.

The recent series of reports by national commissions raised alarms about the quality of teaching and student performance, and about the effect of declining educational standards on national competitiveness. Initially, the reports concentrated on deficiencies within primary and secondary schools: incoherent and watered down curricula, with special problems in languages, math and science, and the "basics;" breakdowns of order and authority in the classroom, along with insufficient emphasis on required attendance and homework; and perceived inadequacies in mastery of the subject-matter by teachers, along with excessive burdens upon them of bureaucractic responsibilities, non-educational requirements, and so on.

But in the last couple of years, related issues have been raised about our postsecondary institutions. We too have had to look at the integrity of our curricula. We have had to confront the ramifications of a generation's excessive privileges in choosing electives over general education courses and over major/minor concentrations. We have had to face issues of standards: e.g., performance minimums for admission and graduation; grade-inflation; preferential criteria for the economically and culturally disenfranchised; remediation; and more. And, we have had to try to reconcile our traditional ideal of a professoriate composed of the "best and brightest," with the reality of one whose quality is suspect or questioned in some quarters.

The issues facing today's college faculty are neither unrelated nor identical to those facing K-12 teachers. It is assuredly not simply a matter of *our* being expected to make up for *their* failures. Nor do the potential solutions to our respective problems always converge. For example, the broad thrust for reform in the training of K-12 teachers seems to be toward better subject-matter competence and less devotion to "methods-oriented" education courses. But for college faculty, it seems arguable that greater emphasis on pedagogy itself would be beneficial, particularly at the teaching assistant and junior faculty level.

All the evidence appears to indicate a broad and sincere commitment to educational reform, but if we are

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indeed taking teaching seriously, for me the more central question is: how seriously are we taking our *teachers*? After all—trite as it sounds—it is teachers who do the teaching. If you care about teaching, you must therefore care about teachers.

Erosion of Salaries

Let us consider some issues of consequence in regard to our national professoriate today. First is the erosion of faculty salaries.

From 1970-71 to 1984-85, the national average faculty salary, when adjusted for inflation, fell 15.1%. The most severe losses of purchasing power took place in the mid-to-late 1970s. Admittedly, since 1981 or 1982 both nominal and real faculty salaries have increased, the former more markedly than the latter. But recent improvements have been much too small to offset the cumulative effect of an entire decade of decline. Moreover, in a period when real income fell, held steady, or rose only fractionally for most workers, erosion cut much deeper into college and university faculty salaries than into those of the workforce as a whole. In fact, faculty fared significantly worse than government employees and manufacturing workers, two groups widely perceived as having borne the brunt of hard times. (Bowen and Schuster, 1986, 80-86)

Within the faculty as a whole, certain institutions, types of institutions, and disciplinary groups suffered less than others. In high-demand fields such as business, engineering, and computer science, for example, faculty salaries grew at a healthy pace in many institutions. Ironically, however, it was often these fields where campuses had (and still have) the greatest difficulty attracting and retaining faculty because of competition from nonacademic employers. For instance, a young assistant professor of computer science, holding a Ph.D. with earnings perhaps in the high twenties, cannot help noticing that a student graduating with a B.S. has the possibility of landing a corporate or commerical position with earnings potential several multiples of his or her own. At a certain point, regardless of personal commitments and any psychic rewards of academic life, the allure of substantially increased earnings elsewhere has proven decisive for many such faculty, and it will continue to do so.

Of equal concern is the student's view. Just as professors note the employment options of their students, they in turn are testing potential teaching careers against opportunities in the corporate world. Where will the future professoriate come from if teaching is seen as a condition of chronic financial sacrifice?

Deprofessionalization

Next, let us look at what might be called the "deprofessionalization" of the faculty.

One component of this is the increasing use of part-time or adjunct faculty in colleges and universities all over the country. For many years, the role of part-time or adjunct teachers was primarily to support campus continuing education programs. (I would stress that this does not apply to fields such as medicine where clinical instruction by practitioners is absolutely mandatory.) Such individuals, often teaching non-credit classes during evening hours or on weekends, were commonly professionals or others with full-time positions outside the academy. Thus their provisional status as institutional employees was of little concern, and they frequently brought to their classes valuable insight, unique experience, and practical perspectives from beyond the campus.

Over the last fifteen years, however, the situation has changed rather dramatically. In many institutions, part-time and adjunct appointments make up a significantly larger fraction of the total faculty. They are more likely than before to be teaching regularly scheduled classes as part of credit/degree curricula. Instead of community-based resource persons with particular areas of expertise, they are often young Ph.D.-holders who have so far been unsuccessful in landing full-time or tenure-track employment. They rely on faculty appointments, sometimes a composite of part-time jobs on two or more campuses, for their primary livelihood. And because part-time positions are rarely commensurate in salaries or benefits with full-time positions, those who hold them experience a kind of marginality within the campus community that is as economically constraining as it is professionally demoralizing.

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If an appreciable fraction of college faculty is to have a permanently marginal part-time status, we can readily predict an unhealthy construction of the flow of young graduate degree holders into the professoriate. And, from the student's vantage, the negative aspects are no less disturbing. A "deprofessionalized" faculty member tends not to offer students the same access through office hours,

Part-time faculty experience a kind of marginality within the campus community that is as economically constraining as it is professionally demoralizing.

informal contact, and general exposure.

A second "deprofessionalizing" trend has combined non-tenure stream hiring with a growing reluctance by institutions to make tenure awards to young faculty. By now, a whole generation of campus administrators has experienced the volatility of academic demand for particular subjects and, therefore, for faculty from particular disciplines. The majority have labored under the difficulties of managing change within colleges, schools, or departments that are "tenured-in." Given tenure's reality as a multi-decade, million-dollar-plus commitment, today's younger faculty have found achieving tenure a far more elusive goal than previous generations of scholars.

Taken altogether, the new employment patterns have worrisome consequences, especially (though not solely) for younger faculty. To a certain degree, academia's predictable career ladder has been, if not yanked from beneath them, at least given an alarming shake. Postgraduate and/or junior faculty living circumstances have come to seem not merely the temporary rigors of apprenticeship, but rather the bleak horizon of downgraded expectations. Among those affected, what Bowen and Schuster call "nomadic" lifestyles have become common: moving from campus to campus every few years, every year, or even every semester. Predictably, institutional loyalties hardly flourish under such conditions.

These two often-overlapping faculty groups—the part-timers and the nomads—face yet another set of problems: the effect of truncated or disjointed academic careers on their retirement security. The level of security anticipated by today's retiring faculty, who have followed traditional academic careers, is likely to be far different than that of their younger colleagues. Allowing salaries to lag behind in recent years has ominous implications for all faculty, but for the part-timers and nomads the outlook is acutely worrisome. In the late 1970s, the AAUP conducted a national sampling of part-time faculty which found they were seldom eligible for retirement coverage—almost never, in fact, if their appointments were less than half-time. Others, eligible to participate in various state retirement systems, found their real prospects of future benefits limited by delayed vesting periods of five to ten years.

All of these factors will extend their corrosive effects far into the future of the deprofessionalized faculty member, including retirement. Pension benefits of one sort or another may be acquired along the way, and they may be portable, but if career contributions have been low, financial security will be proportionately diminished in retirement. Moreover, the Tax Reform Act may induce future modifications that will affect not only part-timers and the nomads, but also faculty and administrators who voluntarily change positions. Eventually, higher education may find itself with a new class of academics approaching retirement age with the prospect of alarmingly inadequate resources for their final years.

Mandatory Retirement

A third and final issue revolves around the concept of mandatory retirement.

Among faculty, as in the wider society, the idea of opposing mandatory retirement at a given age would seem a little odd. Retirement is something to look forward to as a respite from labor, a reward for service, a space for new involvements and growth after long decades in a career. But today, a growing number of people reject the basic premises of retirement. They see it as a threat to the individual's health and sense of personal usefulness, as well as a waste of talent. Further, they point out that it is unreasonable to expect an ever-smaller number of younger workers to support a growing proportion of retirees, especially those willing, able, and even eager to continue supporting themselves.

At the same time, however, it seems fair to suggest that for many persons in many fields, aging inevitably brings with it both physical and intellectual impediments to full performance. Moreover, extending the work-life of older persons seems to imply deferring opportunities for growth and advancement among younger ones. This raises questions about the orderly succession of leadership and experience, and about the stability and continuity of professional expertise.

Today's younger faculty have found achieving tenure a far more elusive goal than previous generations of scholars.

Until recently, most institutions have had upper age limits for faculty employment: previously age 65 with 70 now gaining wider favor. But with the elimination of mandatory retirement in other sectors of the economy, it is coming under even more fire in academia. This is not only because scholars and intellectuals tend to have highly developed sensitivities about individual rights, but also because it appears to conflict implicitly with the traditional protections guaranteed by tenure.

And yet the fact is that colleges and universities must cope with change. The most important prerequisite for managing change is flexibility. Eliminating mandatory retirement, how-

ever beneficial it may look from many other vantages, clearly reduces, rather than increases, the scholarly and administrative flexibility of any academic unit.

So here again, we have a dilemma not likely to resolve itself into facile synthesis. It is a conflict without easy answers, made more difficult by its interaction with other changes within the faculty and other challenges of the sort outlined above. It is a dilemma, too, that is going to get worse before it gets better.

It is true that changes in the tax code may have an impact on when certain retirement annuity disbursements must begin. It is also true that we have limited experience with the ages that faculty will actually choose to retire in an era without mandates. Currently, some 11 percent of faculty members retire before age 61; over 78 percent retire before they are 67, and nearly 90 percent before they are 70. Over the last decade there has been a trend toward earlier retirements, and it may continue. However, the research indicates that retirement decisions revolve around two factors:

Teaching may be the only remaining field where much of the public rejects out of hand the old proposition that "You get what you pay for."

1) having an adequate income from Social Security, institutional retirement plans, personal savings, and/or a combination of these; and 2) having adequate protection against the financial burdens of possible major illnesses or injuries. This being the case, it is reasonable to suggest that the early retirement trend simply reflects an underlying financial trend; increasing numbers of faculty see early retirement as an economically attractive option.

If prospects for post-employment income and medical cost deferment significantly diminish, the early retirement trend may slow down or even reverse itself. The average age of retirement may stabilize and hold steady over relatively long periods, or it may, in the absence of compulsory retirement rules, begin to climb as large numbers of faculty reach 65 and older without the material resources to relinquish their jobs.

Right now, we simply do not know. Managing change and planning for future staffing thus presents a greater challenge to our colleges and universities than ever before. Certainly no institutional administration seeks to take advantage of these problems in its pursuit of greater flexibility in managing and developing its faculty. The difficulties are an unintended and certainly undesirable side-effect. Nevertheless, as today's "baby-boom" faculty exert increasing pressure on channels of faculty mobility and advancement, the retirement issue seems destined to become more complex and more painful.

Truth and Ascesis

These three issues are not the first that come to mind when we talk about "taking teaching seriously." Rather, they raise questions about how seriously we take our teachers themselves, and they throw into relief what seem to be some highly questionable assumptions we unconsciously hold about teaching as a critical activity within our culture.

Toward the end of his life, Michel Foucault was tracing the development in Hellenic and subsequent thought of a strong correlation between truth and *ascesis*: knowledge and asceticism. As early as the pre-Socratics, there appears in the writing of Greek philosophers the idea that the best, and perhaps the only, road to real wisdom is the road of purity. Both the pleasures of the flesh and the goods of this world are seen as a corruption of the spirit, or at best as encumbrances that distract the will. For the seer, the philosopher, and the teacher, material concerns become not merely irrelevant, but actively incompatible.

At the time when standards of postsecondary instruction were supposedly falling, higher education steadily lost ground to other priorities in the competition for public support.

This notion is not confined to Hellenism. It recurs across and throughout our intellectual heritage. It is perfectly expressive of Judaic-Christian sentiments. It is by no means foreign to Buddhism and other systems of the East. It is an aspect of Islamic thought and can even be uncovered in that most devout of secular religions, modern Revolutionism.

It is not far-fetched to suggest that our own society still subscribes, although not altogether consciously, to this same bonding of knowledge and asceticism. We can detect it in the emergence of the earliest universities from monastic roots, and we can discover it in all the stereotypes of the modern scholar: "naivete," "absent-mindedness," impracticality, and unworldliness.

We can also discover this stereotype in the widespread resistance to the suggestion that many of the problems with modern teaching may be directly related to the very concrete problems of compensation, standard of living, career development, and material well-being of teachers themselves. The truth is, we do not like to think of teachers as motivated even in part by that which motivates virtually all of us—the desire not only to do useful and enjoyable work, but also to derive from it a reasonable level of material comfort and economic security for ourselves and our families. We have inherited from history a strange need to view our teachers as beyond such concerns, to such an

extent that it actually alarms us when it is suggested that there may be some direct connection between poor compensation and poor education. In this view, the misty-eyed idealization of "Mr. Chips" is just the Western translation of India's holy *fakirs*—enlightened and impoverished in roughly equal measures.

This peculiar predisposition plays very conveniently into the hands of others who, for a variety of reasons far more pragmatic than philosophical, resist education's claim to a higher social priority and a greater share of society's resources. Indeed, teaching may be the only remaining field where much of the public still rejects out of hand the old proposition that "You get what you pay for."

Throwing money at a problem often does make it go away—at least if you throw it at the right problem, in the right way, and in sufficient amounts.

When it comes to teaching, the premise seems to be "The best things in life are free"—or as close to it as society can manage.

So, when we discuss the problems of education today, we hear invariably about the need to restore the teacher's "moral authority," or the teacher's "place of respect" within the community. Or we are told that we must find ways to reattract "the best and brightest" to teaching. Or it is argued that teachers must recommit themselves to an arduous regimen of "the basics." But those who call for improved compensation, especially across-the-board rather than so-called "merit" incentives, are usually dismissed rather curtly as simplistic, self-serving, or, at best, politically unrealistic.

Conclusion

Is it true, as Secretary Bennett and others have assured us, that "throwing money at the problems" won't make them go away?

I don't know. But I do know that at the time when standards of postsecondary instruction were supposedly falling, higher education steadily lost ground to other priorities in the competition for public support. I also know that at a time when all our pundits and sage commentators agree that knowledge and human capital are our two central economic resources, we as a nation have actually lowered the real standard of living of the single group most directly responsible for their creation, preservation, and transmission. When we pay a football coach two or three times more than a Nobel Laureate physicist, something is radically wrong with our priorities!

Evidence is usually a better guide than ideology and the evidence shows that throwing money at a problem often *does* make it go away—at least if you throw it at the right problem, in the right way, and in sufficient amounts. Back in the late fifties, Sputnik was a symbol of the problem: a perceived gap in the scientific capabilities of our young people *vis-a-vis* those in the U.S.S.R. So we threw money at it, and—what do you know? Not only did the problem go away; we also launched and carried through an unprecedented expansion of our postsecondary institutional system. At the same time, we dramatically increased both the size *and* the quality of the national college and university faculty, while broadening and democratizing the student body to a degree literally undreamed of a generation before.

So in the end, what I come to is this: Taking teaching seriously means taking *teachers* seriously—seeing them as professionals with human needs and human aspirations, not as ascetics whose mystic vocation renders beneath notice all questions of material circumstances and future

Taking teachers seriously means seeing them as professionals with human aspirations . . . not as ascetics whose mystic vocation renders beneath notice all questions of material circumstances and future prospects.

prospects. And above all, it means seeing teachers as the most central creators of human capital and knowledge upon which the future depends.

If many of the leaders of our nation think enough money will resolve the formidable problems posed by the president's Strategic Defense Initiative, surely they can't object to higher education's adopting the same strategy.

Let's *try* throwing some serious money at teachers in our colleges and universities—K-12 school systems, too. With sufficient resources, we can begin to redress the problems of declining purchasing power of wages and the erosion of benefits and pension prospects. We can confront directly the deprofessionalization and economic marginalization of the young faculty who should constitute the future of the profession. And we will be able to consider the tough questions surrounding mandatory versus voluntary retirement in terms of the best and fairest use of precious human talent, rather than in the harsh light of brute exigency.

Then we will see, first hand, whether throwing money at the problem has any impact on the quality of teaching. It may or may not lead us back to a new Golden Age, a return to great expectations. But I strongly suspect it will at least begin to energize and enhance pedagogy and scholarship across the nation—refreshing the weary of today, and restoring the faith of a new generation. ■

Reference

Howard R. Bowen and Jack H. Schuster, *American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986).